

# Civil rights champion trades lawmaking for family



Rep. Howard Orenstein's cluttered office hints at why he's stayed in the House for 10 years. Newspaper-covered display boards tell of victims shot dead — props used to pass gun control laws. There's a human rights award he received for pushing groundbreaking civil rights laws. Charts on government efficiency reveal another of his key interests.

But the St. Paul DFLer's office also reveals to why he's leaving after this session.

Three bright-eyed kids and his wife, Barbara Frey, smile from behind a dozen picture frames. They take up an entire corner of the room.

Yes, Orenstein says he's grown frustrated with the pace of change in state government. And yes, higher office may be in his future. But family is the main reason he's stepping down, he says.

"It's no secret I've been frustrated both about local politics and the Legislature. But I don't think I'd be leaving just out of frustration because I do think it's important to fight these battles," said Orenstein, 40. "I've got three children under eight and I've got a strong marriage that I'd like to keep strong so my ability to put in the time and bring the passion to the debate that I like to have is less than it used to be. So it's a good time to let someone new come in."

Family — specifically, the expected birth of his third child — was his reason for not running for mayor of St. Paul in 1993 after initially expressing interest.

The man who got hooked on politics while door-knocking for former Tennessee Senator Jim Sasser has done a lot since he was elected to District 64B in 1986. He's sponsored civil rights measures that were later passed by Congress. He has fought passionately for gun control and access to abortion clinics for those searching for services and has laws on the books to prove it. He increased the state's efforts to accommodate people with disabilities. He was mentioned as a possible successor to former Speaker of the House Dee Long (DFL-Mpls).

"We're losing one of our very best legislators. . . . I really don't know who will be able



Rep. Howard Orenstein

**Noted achievements:** The four legislative accomplishments Orenstein is most proud of include his Youth Works community service program, the 1993 clinic access law, changes in the gun control debate, and his Joint Property Tax Advisory Committee, which aims to streamline St. Paul and Ramsey County government.

The 1993 clinic access law, aimed at preventing violence by the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, increased penalties to anyone blocking access to a clinic. It was one of the strongest laws in the nation when it was passed.

to take his place," said Rep. Andy Dawkins (DFL-St. Paul), who tried to talk Orenstein out of leaving "at least half a dozen times."

Crucial to his success, supporters say, has been his hard work, creativity, and respect for others. His quick, dry sense of humor has aided him to a lesser degree, they say.

"He used humor very effectively to get people to like him so that he could be effective in his legislative goals," said Dawkins. "And he knows how to work the floor, how to neutralize the other side."

On his key issues, Orenstein has a habit of knowing daily schedules days in advance, knowing every amendment that's up and always having an amendment in hand. As chair of the Government Efficiency and Oversight Committee, he's known for extending meetings to ensure everyone who shows up gets to testify.

"He has respect for people, including those with whom he has great philosophical differences," said Jane Vanderpoel, his committee administrator.

Rep. Charlie Weaver (R-Anoka) has disagreed with Orenstein on some big issues like gun control and abortion. Still, the two have always been able to talk things out, Weaver said.

"One of Howard's talents is that he doesn't personalize issues. Too many of us here tend to do that," Weaver said. "He has brought to this institution integrity, dedication to his issues and the notion that principles are worth fighting for."

Orenstein also helped pass gun control legislation in 1993, including an expansion of the waiting period and an increase in

penalties for selling guns to minors. He thinks he's affected the firearms debate.

"Our gains have been very small," he said. "But I think it's a fairer fight now. . . . Before the visibility was raised, the gun lobby would pretty much operate with impunity."

In addition, Orenstein made Minnesota the first state in the nation in 1988 to include sexual orientation in the category of hate crimes — two years before Congress did the same. He sponsored civil rights laws covering people who are disabled in 1989 — two years before Congress. Orenstein's jobs rights bill, signed into law in 1990, restored employees' rights to sue for discrimination in some instances. The measure put him on the front of *The New York Times*. It was the most sweeping effort nationwide to lessen the impact of several Supreme Court decisions that rolled back employees rights to sue based on discrimination.

While he's got his critics for these high-profile efforts, Orenstein is considered a visionary by some.

"I think he takes seriously what Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis referred to as the states as laboratories of experimentation," said Professor Steve Hatting of the University of St. Thomas' political science department, who has voted for Orenstein.

"I think he's got the talent and the ability and the commitment to public life that we really need in this state," Hatting said. "Whatever his future plans are, I think a lot of people hope they would include a second thought about public office."

— Kendall Anderson